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ABSTRACT

In forming a new curriculum for the English Department at Louisiana State University, the Literature Concentration Subcommittee faced a daunting array of competing demands. How can students gain a perspective on the terrain of literary studies, including canonical and non-canonical texts? How can they experience the rich diversity of the discipline without becoming bewildered by its competing claims of literary value and critical stance? The new curriculum should expose students to certain traditional features of English studies yet at the same time tap the most recent research of the faculty. Attempting to address all these matters, the subcommittee proposed the following sequence for students concentrating in literature: introductions to literary study, including a course in critical strategies, followed by three courses in chronological study of major authors and texts, followed by a historically-based course in criticism, followed by specialized seminars. Students will also have to satisfy a "diversity requirement." Given this plan, however, at least one member of the committee is left wondering if the new curriculum is not less rather than more flexible than the curriculum it proposes to replace, and if this system of requirements is not overly prescriptive. Furthermore, once the curriculum is in place, it will have to be debugged. One possible forum for such a process would be a one-credit-hour course in which senior English majors review the curriculum before they leave the university. (TB)

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STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCE IN CURRICULA FOR ENGLISH MAJORS

When our curriculum revision committee held a meeting with students to show them our incomplete outline for a new curriculum for English majors and to ask for their advice on how to refine it. One student faulted our revision for slighting "great literary figure[s]" and for recommending that sophomores take a course in Literature and Critical Strategies, where he assumed they would read "Stanley Fish before they are able to deal with [the] basic formal elements" of texts. "The present curriculum," he complained, "is already incoherent enough." Another student countered, "It is so important that students become exposed to literary 'buzz words,' critical terms early on. I think the critical theory class should be implemented in the sophomore year." A third chided us, "Drop the Shakespeare requirement. . . . the only reason that you and everyone else thinks [sic.] he's so great is because you've been taught that all of your life. . . . Wake up and smell the coffee! He's dead."

Where had I heard these sentiments before? For three and a half years in countless committee meetings, open forums, and subcommittee meetings with my colleagues, as we hammered out our plans for a new curriculum. The students simply replicated our own questions and debates: How can students gain a perspective on the terrain of literary studies, including canonical and non-canonical texts? How can they experience the rich diversity of our discipline without becoming bewildered by its competing claims of literary value and critical stance? What sequence of courses will guide students toward reading complex texts, writing about them subtly, and thinking about the processes of reading and writing?

After years of debate--sometimes rancorous and political--we are forging an uneasy compromise, balancing canonical and non-canonical texts, literature and

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theory, literary history and cultural diversity. But as we get closer to actually creating courses, questions of sequencing take on a new prominence in these ongoing debates. For clarity, I will focus on the problems of sequencing courses in the Literature Concentration, leaving aside the other two concentrations--Creative Writing, and Writing and Culture--which face similar problems.

After our faculty had given a vote of confidence to a general structure for the English major, the subcommittee charged with creating the Literature Concentration began its deliberations. The first meeting opened with the complaints heard in English department coffee lounges from Oregon to Florida. "Why can't my students in senior-level courses read a Yeats poem? Why can't they write coherent prose? Why haven't they read anything written before last Tuesday? Why are they terrified of theory?" Colleagues proposed that we end this disgraceful state of affairs first, by creating special English major sections of the second required freshman composition course, which is focused on argumentation; students would write arguments about literature. Then, in the sophomore year, we could create a special track of General Education literature courses just for English majors. These courses might emphasize literary modes and genres or critical strategies for interpreting texts; we'd work that out later. At last, students would be ready for surveys of British and American literature, courses in critical theory, and specialized seminars.

There was only one problem with this ideal vision: most of our students don't decide to become English majors until their sophomore and junior years. In the spring of 1993, for example, we had 415 majors, too few for a university of over 23,000 students: of these, only 6 were freshmen, 77 were sophomores, and 141 were juniors. According to this pattern, which has held steady for several years, there would be too few students to take the freshman and sophomore courses tailored for English majors that our subcommittee wanted to create. The hard reality is that most of our students decide to become English majors <u>after</u> having taken sophomore

introductions to literary study courses, which are university General Education Requirements. Furthermore, because we want to increase the number of majors, we don't want to require students who declare late to repeat specialized freshmen or sophomore courses.

This pattern of choosing the English major creates a second problem. Our present curriculum requires majors to take a two-course survey of British literature at the sophomore level, but in fact, many, if not most, of our majors take the other sophomore-level sequence in fiction, poetry, and drama, then decide to major in English. Rather than asking them to backtrack to fulfill the survey requirement, we routinely approve the substitution of the genre courses for the historical survey. Our new majors then proceed into upper-level required courses in Shakespeare, Milton or Chaucer, and four literary periods or disciplines frequently without any overview of British or American literary history or introduction to literary theory.

Furthermore, many of those who do take the British surveys at the sophomore level find them disappointing. In these courses, we are asking mixed classes of English majors and non-majors to learn to read literature by assigning Chaucer in Middle English or The Faerie Queene or Aphra Behn or Blake or Browning or Woolf or Joyce, AND we are trying to provide an overview of literary history, AND we are trying to teach them how to write about texts. Alas, we seldom succeed at all these tasks; on questionnaires, students tell us that the survey courses ask them to cover too much too fast.

So our Literature Concentration Subcommittee, charged to revise these requirements, faced competing demands: students need to learn to read complex literature, to write about it with critical sophistication, and to place what they have read in a framework, and they need a structure of requirements flexible enough to allow them to decide to major in English in their sophomore and even junior year.

These competing demands, tangled as they seem, oversimplify the problem because they focus only on the students' needs; teachers have needs too (and during four years of curriculum revision, I have found my colleagues uniquely articulate in expressing their needs). They do have a point: a curriculum is most exciting when it teaches what a faculty knows and loves. When our teaching and research enrich each other, naturally we teach with zest and élan. The evolution of our present curriculum, which has not been systematically revised within living memory, is an object lesson in this reality. In the old curriculum, the upper-level courses are categorized into seven literary periods and disciplines--such as Restoration and Eighteenth-Century, American Literature, Writing and Language. Our literature majors fulfill distribution requirements by taking one course from four of these seven groups. Over the past fifteen years, as we have hired new faculty, we have added new courses in women's studies, African-American literature, film, literature and psychology, popular culture, literature and ethnicity, and so forth. As a result, the last category "Backgrounds to Literature" has swollen into an enormity that now surpasses all the other categories. These courses are popular with students, who take them as electives, even though only one satisfies the requirement for the major, and with faculty, some of whom would rather teach them than the required sophomore genre and survey courses. But because these standard courses satisfy the university's General Education Requirements, we can only offer more specialized courses infrequently. And what, ask both students and faculty, is the relation between these "backgrounds" courses and the rest of the curriculum based on literary history and canonical figures?

This is our challenge: to create a curriculum (1) that will guide students--even those late-comers to the English major--to read, write, think critically, and weave what they are learning into a fabric, and (2) that will encourage a richly diverse faculty to bring into the classroom the excitement of their research. After

considerable struggle, we have sketched an outline for a new curriculum designed to meet these needs.

Since the sophomore-level courses satisfy the university's General Education Requirement, we offer between 70 and 90 sections of them a semester, and, according to our figures, they are our mine for English majors. The plans for a new curriculum have established a series of objectives for all of these courses, regardless of their particular focus:

> Upon completion of their requirements in introductory literature courses, students should be able
> to paraphrase passages accurately,
> to read closely in order to explicate the literal and figurative meaning of passages,
> to identify larger themes, structures, and patterns in a literary work as a whole,
> to begin to relate a literary work to relevant discursive contexts, such as generic conventions and literary traditions, and
> to begin to understand the larger cultural contexts of a literary work, both diachronic and synchronic.
>
> Students should write frequently to communicate their critical and interpretive insights about literary texts. Their writing should move beyond merely retelling a story, into analysis, interpretation, and argumentation.
>
> Students should also think about the process of reading itself. They should be able to identify and use effectively terms basic to literary interpretation, and to be aware that a variety of methodologies may be used to analyze a text.

We have created five literature courses to meet these objectives from which English majors must select two. Since many curricula require at least one and often two introductory literature courses to fulfill General Education Requirements, even the sophomore who decides late to be an English major will not have to retake any sophomore-level courses. S/he will have fulfilled the English requirement with these General Education courses. Most students will probably opt for the standard Introductions to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama, but we are revising these to allow for more flexibility in the selection of texts and the organization of sections around announced themes, e.g. The Fiction of Initiation, The Family in Drama and Film, etc.

In order to introduce students to literary study through a variety of genres or genres other than those emphasized in the genre courses, we have created a special topics course, Literary Traditions and Themes, which we hope will be approved for General Education credit. Although the content of this course will vary from section to section--e.g. The Epic, The War Between the Sexes, American Autobiography, Utopias and Dystopias--all sections of Literary Traditions and Themes must fulfill the objectives set for all introductory literature courses. We hope that greater flexibility in the standard genre courses and the new special topics course will reinvigorate our teaching at the sophomore level, as faculty introduce sophomores to the texts and approaches about which they care most deeply.

For those few students who know already that they want to major in English and concentrate in literature, we have created a course--recommended not required--in Critical Strategies that will look at a small number of literary works from several critical perspectives--formalist, historical, mythic, feminist, Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, etc. Although this course will foreground literary theory and critical practice, it must also fulfill the objectives set for all introductory literature courses. Thus we hope it too will be approved for General Education credit, although we expect some opposition from faculty outside the English department, who may not see it as "foundational," the term often used to describe General Education courses.

To the Literature Concentration Subcommittee, this plan for five sophomore-level courses that would recruit and prepare English majors seemed workable, but the Literature Concentration is only one of three concentrations that an English major may choose; the other two are Creative Writing and a brand new creation, Writing and Culture. The subcommittee creating this new concentration has also designed a sophomore-level course, Interpreting Discourse, that they want approved for General Education credit. Interpreting Discourse has been designed to "give students from all fields a broad understanding of the nature, use, and power of

language. . . . Students will learn to recognize and describe the linguistic constructions, rhetorical strategies, and cultural contexts that shape a specific discourse." Interpreting Discourse will be the gate-way course to the Writing and Culture concentration, so students need to be able to take it in their sophomore year as one of their General Education requirements, while they are still deciding what major and/or concentration to choose. This course has raised questions of sequence and structure for the English major: Should we also include Interpreting Discourse in the group of sophomore-level courses that will count for credit toward the concentrations in Literature and Creative Writing? If all six courses--Poetry, Fiction, Drama, Literary Traditions and Themes, Critical Strategies, and Interpreting Discourse--are accepted for General Education credit and if all are accepted for credit toward requirements in all three concentrations, then students will have been introduced to the kind of work they will do in all three concentrations and can make informed choices about their programs.

But Interpreting Discourse does not privilege literature above other forms of discourse, and it will teach interpretation from linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural, not the more traditional formalist and historical, perspectives. Some traditionalists on the Literature and Creative Writing faculties ask, "Will this course prepare students to read Milton or Austen or Eliot?" This questions prompts members of the Writing and Culture Subcommittee to reply, "Will a course focused on the formalist analysis of poetry prepare students for advanced work in cultural theory, linguistics, or technical writing?" Taken as a whole, our sequence of sophomore-level courses will introduce students to the rich diversity of English studies in our department. But we can't be sure that students will take the courses that they need to prepare them for upper-level work in their chosen concentration. This isn't the only glitch in the system.

As we envision the new curriculum, the student who has decided to major in English with a concentration in Literature will arrive at her junior year, having had two introductions to literary study, one of which may have been Literature and Critical Strategies. At this point s/he will begin a series of four historically structured courses--three courses in the Chronological Study of Major Authors and Texts, in which British and American literature will be taught in each course, plus a survey of Literary Criticism, from Plato to the present. These courses are designed to give students the perspective on the terrain of literary studies that they tell us and we feel they lack. As you can imagine, however, these surveys have been a focus of controversy. Originally, we planned to require that Shakespeare be taught in the first survey course, but many faculty members, like the first student I quoted, have insisted that Shakespeare be a required course. Other faculty, like the second and third student I quoted, feel frustrated that this curriculum privileges canonical texts, and in response, they have proposed a "diversity requirement"--that is one course chosen from a group including courses in gender studies, popular culture, folklore, and African-American literature. They want students to gain the theoretical tools and wide perspective of reading diverse texts that will allow them to question constructs like literary periods and canons.

We are trying to balance these competing visions by

1. giving the sophomores who decide to major in English an introduction to Critical Strategies before they begin the sequence of courses in the Chronological Study of Major Authors and Texts,

2. by defining the Chronological Study courses so that they will focus not only on canonical literature, but also on the process of canon formation,

3. by establishing the principle that, if Shakespeare and the Chronological Study courses are foundational, then they may be taught by any member of the department from a variety of critical perspectives, and

4. by instituting a "diversity requirement."

Although this compromise may satisfy competing faculty interests, what about the students? They may encounter several problems in making their way through this curriculum.

At our meeting with students, several English majors objected that the students who decide to major in English in the junior year will not have taken the Critical Strategies course and will thus be at a severe disadvantage in the junior-level survey of Criticism. Furthermore, I suspect that the students, many of whom fear theory courses, will put off taking the Criticism course, which is supposed to prepare them for senior-level seminars, until their last semester. So the sequence we have planned--Introductions to Literary Study, including a course in Critical Strategies, followed by three courses in the Chronological Study of Major Authors and Texts, followed by a historically-based course in Criticism, followed by specialized seminars--may be a mythic vision, not a path real students follow.

Even more worrisome is the problem of the number of requirements in the new curriculum. Because students decide to be English majors so late, most of the required courses have to be squeezed into the junior and senior years. Because our faculty is so divided, our requirements must include courses focused historically and courses focused culturally in order to reach a compromise. What this means for the students is a less, not more flexible curriculum than the one we are revising: in their junior and senior years, they must take a Shakespeare course, three courses in the Chronological Study of Major Authors and Texts, a Criticism course, and a "diversity requirement." Is this system of requirements overly prescriptive?

And what structure should we create for the two to five courses they may choose beyond these requirements? We are proposing special topics courses within broadly defined categories such as Studies in the Renaissance, Studies in Autobiography, or Studies in Women and Literature--special topics that would vary

every semester, e.g. Milton as a Baroque Artist, African-American Autobiography, or Women and the Rise of the Novel? The Literature Concentration Subcommittee reasons that the four, junior-level surveys in British and American Literature and Criticism provide students with a sufficient perspective on the literary terrain; seniors should then be free to pursue special topics in depth. Opponents argue, however, that the junior-level surveys will give insufficient attention to any historical period or major figure, that senior-level period surveys are necessary, and that catalogue titles like "Studies in the Eighteenth Century" are uninformative and dull. Also, opponents want to retain the present senior-level courses, which they claim "have earned their stripes." The Literature Concentration Subcommittee counters that the study of literature has been undergoing such exciting changes in the last fifteen years that we should offer specialized courses that reflect this diversity, and that we should advertise these changing topics in a widely distributed departmental handout. And so around and round we go--along with every other English department trying to revise its curriculum in these "interesting times."

Wherever we light, we are sure of one thing: when we get the new curriculum in place, we will need to de-bug it by talking with its users, the students. In fact, we are considering a way to build this de-bugging process into the system by creating a one-hour "exit" course for graduating students. In this course, we might ask them to review the courses they have taken in order

1. to look for points of connection, patterns of meaning, a perspective on what they have studied,

2. to assess and evaluate their work, considering what they feel they need to study or accomplish next,

3. to represent their work and their curriculum in writing for potential employers or graduate and professional schools, and

4. to assess and evaluate our new curriculum.

The goal of such a course would be to help students move into the next phase of their lives, while it helps us refine our new curriculum. Despite all our student questionnaires and meetings, what we intend as their itinerary through the English major may, in fact, bear little relation to what they actually experience. As we discover all the glitches in the system, we can revise courses, and advise the next class of students how to make their way through the curriculum. Maybe, just maybe, students six years from now won't echo this year's student who complained, "The present curriculum is . . . incoherent enough."